



December 21, 2020

The Honorable Muriel Bowser
Mayor
1350 Pennsylvania Ave, NW
Washington, DC 20004

Dear Mayor Bowser,

We are writing to urge you to make funds available for schools wishing to offer outdoor learning options to students returning for in-person schooling during the remainder of the 2020-2021 school year. Commensurate with funding that has been made available for local bars and restaurants to winterize outdoor seating areas, we urge you to identify and reprogram no less than \$4 million dollars for DC Public Schools (DCPS) and DC public charter schools to use toward creating safe, well-equipped, and weather-appropriate outdoor learning spaces and to engage with partner organizations should they choose to do so. Resources that schools might need in order to provide outdoor learning options include but are not limited to:

- training to prepare teachers for effective outdoor instruction
- warm clothing for students and educators
- tents, heaters, and other infrastructure
- weather-resistant furniture, storage, and equipment
- assistance from consultants and partnering organizations

In addition to making funds directly available to schools to support outdoor learning initiatives, we further urge you to direct:

1. Office of the State Superintendent to reinstate and expand pre-existing school partnerships supported through the Healthy Schools Act/Environmental Learning Plan initiatives.¹
2. District of Columbia Public Schools to reinstate and increase pre-pandemic funding for school partner organizations that provide on-site programming or take advantage of the District's wealth of cultural sites and natural settings to engage students in experiential outdoor learning.²

While addressing academic loss during the pandemic is an urgent concern, schools are also facing an increase in childhood trauma, creating additional strain on educators and families. Outdoor learning has been shown to improve student engagement and academic outcomes, as well as physical and mental health. Community-based environmental and outdoor education programs are equipped to assist schools in offering innovative and supportive partnerships that were available to many schools across the city pre-pandemic. We therefore see it as an imperative that such partnerships be made widely available to schools wishing to offer such options.

¹ See for example <https://osse.dc.gov/service/farm-school-program> and [https://osse.dc.gov/sites/default/files/dc/sites/osse/page_content/attachments/EnvLiteracyOrganizations%20ELFInse rt_2014.pdf](https://osse.dc.gov/sites/default/files/dc/sites/osse/page_content/attachments/EnvLiteracyOrganizations%20ELFInse%20rt_2014.pdf).

² See for example <https://www.freshfarm.org/foodprints/schools> and <https://www.out-teach.org/partner-with-us/school-partners/>. Funds should also be made available for schools to partner with organizations such as Urban Adventure Squad, Capital Experience Lab, among others that provide ready-to-go or tailored standards-based outdoor programming.



We understand that families, especially our essential workers and those families already impacted by systemic inequities, are struggling with distance learning. We are also aware that many of our city's most vulnerable students are not able to access the academic, social-emotional or other vital supports they once received from in-person schooling. We also know that low-income communities and communities of color are also disproportionately impacted by the spread of the COVID-19 virus.³ That is why it is essential that schools offer safer options for all families, but especially for those who are most in need of in-person schooling.

Fortunately, there is strong scientific evidence that being outdoor greatly mitigates the spread of the COVID-19 virus.⁴ We assume it is for this reason that the city has made funding available for restaurants and bars to accommodate customers with outdoor seating. And, just as open restaurants help ensure essential tax revenue for the District, open schools mean more working parents - especially mothers - can return to work confident that their children are safely learning outdoors with trusted adults at familiar schools and community institutions. Currently Term 2 and 3 plans are focused on bringing students back to indoor settings, which many families are wary of and will likely avoid. Many more would come if schools could offer the same outdoor settings local eateries are able to offer their customers.

Last month, eight members of the State Board signed a letter recommending that schools be allowed to create their own reopening plans based on the capacity and need of their respective school communities and, further, that the District and city should support schools in operationalizing these school-based plans. Given the current rise in COVID-19 cases and the expected surge following the holidays, as well as the many academic and affective needs to which schools must attend, it is imperative that the city support school efforts to offer viable outdoor options for in-person learning that keep students, teachers and school staff safe, warm, and engaged during the remainder of the school year.

Sincerely,

Emily Gasoi, Ward 1 Representative
Jack Jacobson, Ward 2 Representative
Ruth Wattenberg, Ward 3 Representative
and President
Frazier O'Leary, Ward 4 Representative
Zachary Parker, Ward 5 Representative
Jessica Sutter, Ward 6 Representative

Karen Williams, Ward 7 Representative
Markus Batchelor, Ward 8 Representative
and Vice President
Alex O'Sullivan, Student Representative

cc: Paul Kihn, Deputy Mayor for Education
Council of the District of Columbia

³ See for example: https://www.dropbox.com/s/ne8w7hbyqs6e2wp/COVID-19%20Parent%20Impact%20Survey%20Results_FINAL2.pdf?dl=0

⁴ See for example: <https://apnews.com/article/rhode-island-anthony-fauci-gina-raimondo-infectious-diseases-virus-outbreak-ef7e8bb311a5f71c4afb11f7d3e77e7f> and <https://academic.oup.com/jid/advance-article/doi/10.1093/infdis/jiaa742/6009483>

